Reflections of Five Writers on Nigeria



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Dr. Wendy Simmons

Writers on America ~ Writers on Nigeria

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Good evening and welcome. We're very pleased that you joined us this evening to talk about the art of writing and the sense of place that informs the act of creating stories. My name is Wendy Simmons and I'm the Regional Information Resource Officer, or librarian if you prefer, for Public Affairs Sections of Anglophone West Africa. I'm based in Lagos.

The genesis of the program was a new publication called "Writers on America", recently produced by our Office of International Information Programs in Washington. I'm not a writer, nor a literary critic, but it is my office that produced the booklet and that was enough of a reason for my colleagues to designate me to introduce our subject this evening.

For those of you who knew our cultural programs in the past, and die hard Cultural Affairs Officers around the world, we are keenly aware that in the past dozen years our focus on the arts and literature has diminished. We may still opt to develop local programs, but with fewer people, more demands pulling us to other priorities, and reduced budgets, these programs became implausible. The booklet you have is a small antidote to, conceived when one of our Cultural Affairs Officers, himself a published author, nearing his retirement, was given the time to produce it. Freedom of expression and freedom of assembly are part of the background which structures American society. Authors are, like everyone else, a product of their society so our authors rarely write about these topics, and do not necessarily feel the need to make strong political statements in their work, although they may. I read recently that Nadine Gordimer wanted to write science fiction, but living in South Africa during apartheid, she could not. American fiction has sometimes been criticized for its lack of dealing with serious topics, its characters' self-absorption. Our relative longterm freedom and peace has allowed our authors to look at other issues.

Our population is made up primarily of people who have come to the country as immigrants, whether voluntarily and legally, or not. Each group of newcomers must go through the painful process of learning to fit into a new culture, often new language, while trying not break ties with the old. Much of our literature has this theme from recent immigrant writers. Although I am from a 2nd generation Russian Jewish family, as opposed to first generation Latvian, the essay by Sven Birkerts resonated deeply with my own family story, down to the discovery of Philip Roth's *Portnoy's Complaint* early in college. My parents did the really had work of making themselves into American children of immigrant parents, but the sense of being an outsider to mainstream US Midwestern society lingered on to the 2nd generation. Like Portnoy and Sven, I yearned to be more like the "blond exotic female, attractive to the easy athletic guy with normal-acting parents," who appeared on television, and must have lived somewhere nearby, although definitely not next door. Unlike Birkerts, I studied anthropology, got interested in Africa and became a librarian.

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The other related, frequent theme of American fiction is the issue of developing or coming into one's own identity. America is still a place where people can, with some very hard work and lots of luck, can begin with little and become a success. The down side of this is that the US is often criticized as a place where individual achievement takes precedence over acting for the good of the community, or even family. So the issue of "finding oneself" or making a success of one's life, and the anguish this may cause, is part of our make up. The best heroes, so we believe, are those that make it not as a result of family wealth or connections, but on their own. The attempt to become a self-made man (usually it is men) without help, against all odds, are often reflected in American literature. Robert Olen Butler writes short stories based on his collection of postcard pictures from the early home cameras used in the early decades of the 20th century. For each he must dream of that optimistic era of our country when the individual achievements and potentials related to technology would have seemed almost endless.

Preparing to speak to you tonight has forced me to think about my own reading habits. I try to keep abreast of the best new American fiction by well-known and first time writers, but have just collected a number of new ones to read. I've also been living in or working related to Africa for most of the 30 years, so make some effort to read the writers of my adopted continent, although more of the southern part of the continent than the western side. And I must warn you that I just finished Amos Tutuola's *The Palm-Wine*

Drinkard for the first time. Na - wa!

Despite the pride Americans often take in our multi-cultural society, especially those of us living outside of it who represent it, those living on its edges know that many problems exist. Our democracy and our unity is still a work in progress. Reading "Writers on America" was an eye opener for me, because in this space American writers and poets speak much toward their unity of purpose and reflect an optimism of spirit, even those from the most oppressed backgrounds, as binding issues in their lives and their art. So I would like to end now by reading from one author who is NOT from an originally immigrant family.

Linda Hogan is a Native American, whose family roots are originally from the Mississippi area. She writes of trees and her Chickasaw tribe's relation to the earth. "I didn't know, when I thought God was a tree, that my ancestors, on the night of their removal from Mississippi to Oklahoma along the Trail of Tears, were witnessed touching the leaves of the trees, the trunks, crying. Their old friends, the trees, is how the observer wrote about their removal to Oklahoma, Indian Territory."

Yet, writers are remarkable people, who overcome their grief or anger or desire for revenge and find reason to keep producing their art. She says: "I love the world. I love everything that lives upon it. And so I write, like this morning under the tree. It is a world of mystery and beauty; this is what gives me words, and those words come from the earth, the language of the land, the remembering the dismembered of the world, as writer Meridel LaSueur called it. I write to be one person who helps to put the world, the lives of humans and non- humans back together, to make them whole again. I do this for the future. I do this for life's sake."

I am sure Nigerian writers have no less to impulse in their relation to the world, so now we wish to hear from you.

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